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ABSTRACT

Twenty practical and concrete tips for being a responsible and effective college or university trustee are listed in this one-page article. These tips are grouped under three headings: (1) be involved; (2) guidelines for participating in board meetings; and (3) you are responsible for your own education. (KC)

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Twenty Steps to Responsible Trusteeship

Be Involved:

1. Come to board meetings and plan to stay for all of each meeting. Your college is asking for a small percentage of your life; this is a large gift from you, but the college needs all of it.
2. Come to committee meetings prepared, and become an expert on at least one aspect of college life. Most boards are working boards. It's an honor to belong, but mostly it's a job to be done.
3. Contribute to the annual fund. Whether a mite or a million, your financial contribution is an indispensable example to thousands of other contributors. If board members won't contribute, why should anyone else?
4. Say a good word for your college wherever and whenever you can, at parties, at church meetings, during business conversations, over the telephone, at clubs and in your neighborhood. Host your colleagues and friends on a visit to your college.

You are responsible for your own education:

5. Read the bylaws and manuals. Get in on the action. Read the materials sent to board members. Bring to the meeting materials sent to you in advance of a meeting.
6. Communicate freely with the president of your college. Invite him or her to lunch; give him or her a chance to think out loud with you. Introduce him or her to a colleague or a group of constituents.
7. Remember the president and staff do not report to you; the president reports to the board.
8. Participate in your college's life. Attend a class, a special lecture, a concert or a special event. Ask for a tour of the facilities. Know the college's strengths and weaknesses.

Guidelines for participating in Board meetings:

9. Insist on seeing the long-range impact of short-range decisions. Be a trustee for future generations. The college is in your trust. Do not mortgage its future.
10. Always ask the questions you really want to ask, however naive, complex, or hard to answer they may be. Make the experts listen to your questions and

explain their answers until you understand them.

11. Ask for data, both hard (cost, registration, statistics) and soft (who favors it, who doesn't, who benefits and who loses).
12. Keep making intelligent comparisons with other institutions you know well. Every institution likes to think of itself as unique. In some ways it is; in others, it isn't. Help your board understand the difference.
13. Learn to spot the differences between zero-sum and variable-sum policy questions. When is it best to do the same with more, to do the same with less, to do less with less, or even more with less?
14. Search for the right timing for change. In some cases, "next year" is almost too late for a board's action. Your influence may not be felt for one or more years after a decision has been made.
15. Keep asking about the appropriate level of board authority. A board charts long-range courses. It neither pilots nor runs the ship. You are the ultimate custodian of the future of your institution; the program, staff, and facilities are the ultimate embodiment of that future. Relating the two roles may require much exploration and patience.
16. Demand proofs of success and failure, again in "hard" and "soft" forms. Work with the administration to clarify beforehand the criteria for success and failure that the board intends to use in the future.
17. Be ready to revise your criteria, but not too ready. Institutions, like ships, cannot reverse course rapidly and frequently. Steadiness without stubbornness makes a good board.
18. Resist stereotyping and the temptation to "prove" by citing isolated instances.
19. Get the spectrum of opinion on controversial matters. Resist captivity to interest groups that happen to be loudest at the moment.
20. Listen for a long time, but not so long that time for decision passes. Not to decide is often a decision.

—George Rainsford
President, Kalamazoo College

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